First Opinions Second Reactions
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First Opinion: Searching for Sarah and Finding History

Bolden, Tonya. *Searching for Sarah Rector: The Richest Black Girl in America.* New York: Abrams, 2014.

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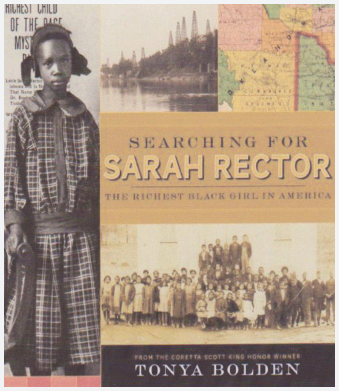

In 1914, the *Chicago Defender* ran a front-page headline about a young girl named Sarah Rector, announcing, "Richest Child of the Race Mysteriously Disappears." The accompanying article charged the child's white guardian with financial misconduct and implied that he had something to do with her disappearance. Fortunately, all of the newspaper's charges turned out to be false: Sarah had never been kidnapped, she was not missing, her guardian was managing her finances well, and her fortune remained intact. Yet the newspaper had not presented an unlikely scenario for children in Sarah's position. Although she had come into a fortune, as a child who had resources and money that others wanted, she and others like her were potential targets for unscrupulous adults.

In the title of her book, *Searching for Sarah Rector*, Tonya Bolden echoes that 1914 newspaper article, using the incident and the article's refrain, "Where is Sarah Rector?," as a metaphor for historical research and biographical construction. Without a diary, interviews, or firsthand accounts from Sarah herself, Bolden can only piece together bits of information on Sarah's life. Yet she does so meticulously, and as she "sort[s] out facts from fictions and confusions about Sarah's life" (51), she tells a wider story of history.

Bolden begins by recounting what is known of Sarah's grandparents. Many are familiar with the devastating forced relocation of Indian populations from the southeast, which came to be known as the Trail of Tears. What is less well known is that black slaves held by members of those tribes also made that journey, many suffering and dying along the way. Sarah's great-grandparents were among the slaves taken west, and the story of the relocated Creeks

also became the story of Sarah's family. In 1866, the federal government mandated that any remaining slaves of the Creeks be freed, and beginning in the 1890s, the government began dividing communally held "Indian Territory," providing individual land allotments to Creeks and Creek freedmen, including former slaves and their descendants. Among those descendants was five-year-old Sarah Rector, born in 1902. When first allotted, Sarah's land was, as Bolden describes it, "no-account land. Rough. Chock-full of rocks. And a burden besides: Taxes were due" (18). Sarah's father leased the land to an oil company, although any prospects of financial benefit seemed slight. Yet when her land was found to be a rich source of oil, Sarah became, as Bolden's subtitle announces, "The Richest Black Girl in America."

Wealth, however, was no guarantee of protection, and the world of oil drilling could be a treacherous one. Oil-rich children, in particular, faced exploitation. Although Sarah fared well, other children were not as fortunate. In one case Bolden records, two black children—a brother and sister, twelve and ten years old, respectively—were murdered for their oil-rich land when their house was intentionally dynamited. Guardians were often appointed by the courts to poor children who came into sudden wealth. Meant to protect children whose own parents may have known little about the financial management of large estates, these guardians wielded tremendous power over the children's finances. The situation seemed even more problematic when white men were frequently appointed to govern the estates of Indian and black children—advocates, like the *Defender* newspaper, were often suspicious of their motives. They sometimes had cause. Bolden records incidents of over a hundred "Indian children with valuable land [who] had been dumped into orphanages while their guardians profited from their estates" (25).

As Bolden uncovers the story of a girl few know much about, she models the importance of focusing on "research and reason [rather] than on scuttlebutt" (52). At the same time, she explores cultural contexts, and specifically in this case, the ways one's age, race, and originating social class intersect with cultural issues of power and agency. With several stories sharing space on a page, Bolden's text is visually multifaceted as well. Sidebars frequently provide complementary historical background and the book is richly illustrated, including reproductions of photographs, paintings, newspaper articles, and maps. Although Bolden notes that "We are still in search of Sarah's voice" (27), she successfully tells us much about Sarah's life and, at the same time, she gives voice to the plight and possibilities many young children face in dangerous times.

About the Author

Paula T. Connolly is an associate professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte where she teaches courses in children's and young adult literature and film. Her recent book, *Slavery in American Children's Literature, 1790–2010* (University of Iowa Press), explores over two centuries of literary representations of race and slavery.